



CARTER G. WOODSON FOUNDATION

A Study
Guide
For
Teachers

THE OKRA DANCE COMPANY



Dance is a form of communication. It is a way of expressing moods and feelings, and telling stories about people, places, and events with carefully choreographed steps and movements of various parts of the body.

As with all art forms, dances are products of specific cultures, peoples, and periods of time. But when people from different racial and ethnic groups come in contact with each other, over time their art forms begin to "rub off" on one another. The world of American dance is no different. For it is indebted to dances from a variety of cultures around the world. Along with European influences, one of the

strongest influences on American dance has come from African and African American cultures.

Contrary to what people once believed, the Africans who were torn from their homeland in West Africa and forced into slavery in America did not leave their culture behind. Just as peoples from Europe, Asia and other parts of the world brought aspects of their cultures to America when they came to live here, so did the Africans bring to America their religious beliefs, customs, and art forms—not the least of which is dance.

One of the companies that sheds light on the African legacies in American dance is the Okra

Dance Company. The company's very name, Okra, is significant because it bears witness to African influences in America, as both the plant itself and its very name were brought to America from West Africa.

In its performances, the Okra Dance Company shares with audiences a variety of dances from the past, traces of which can be seen in many dances of today. These dances include those that Africans brought to America as well as those of European origin which African Americans in a sense "Africanized" and as a result gave birth to new dance forms. These dances differ in terms of rhythm and tempo; and some are accompanied by music while others are performed a cappella. The dances that the Okra Dance Company perform include:

Yembala, a dance from Zaire and Sierra Leone that celebrates a good harvest or a good hunt; Fanga, a welcoming dance from Sierra Leone and Liberia; a Corn-shucking dance developed by African Americans during slavery; the Quadrille which is an African American version of the Minuet; and the Irish Jig, some of the steps of which African Americans borrowed in the creation of Soft Shoe and Tap dance.

In performing these dances the Okra Dance Company reminds its audiences not only of the African American contribution to American Dance, but as well that no culture is an island and that inevitably, as people share the planet earth they share in and influence one another's cultures.



BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

Explain to your students that in its performances, the Okra Dance Company seeks to educate its audiences about the contributions that Africans and African Americans have made to American dance. Explain that as the company educates, it also entertains its audiences as well as increases their appreciation of dance.

Have your students share with one another their ideas, feelings, and knowledge about dance, as well as their previous exposure to dance performances. Then discuss with them the elements that make up a dance, from choreography to costumes to music or the lack thereof.



AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

After reviewing with your students the dances they saw performed, have them develop collectively for each of the dances a one-paragraph description that captures the essence and the most outstanding features of the dances. Ask your students the following questions:

1. Which dance(s) did you like the most and why?
2. In what ways were the dances alike and different?
3. What did the different dances make you think about or feel?
4. Did the dances you saw performed remind you of any other dances you know about?

NEW WORDS

A CAPPELLA: Without instrumental accompaniment.

CHOREOGRAPHY: The art of creating dance steps and movements.

ETHNIC: Having to do with a group of people sharing a common and distinct culture, religion, and language.

JIG: A fast, springy dance usually in triple time.

MINUET: A slow, stately dance of French origin popular in the 17th and 18th centuries.

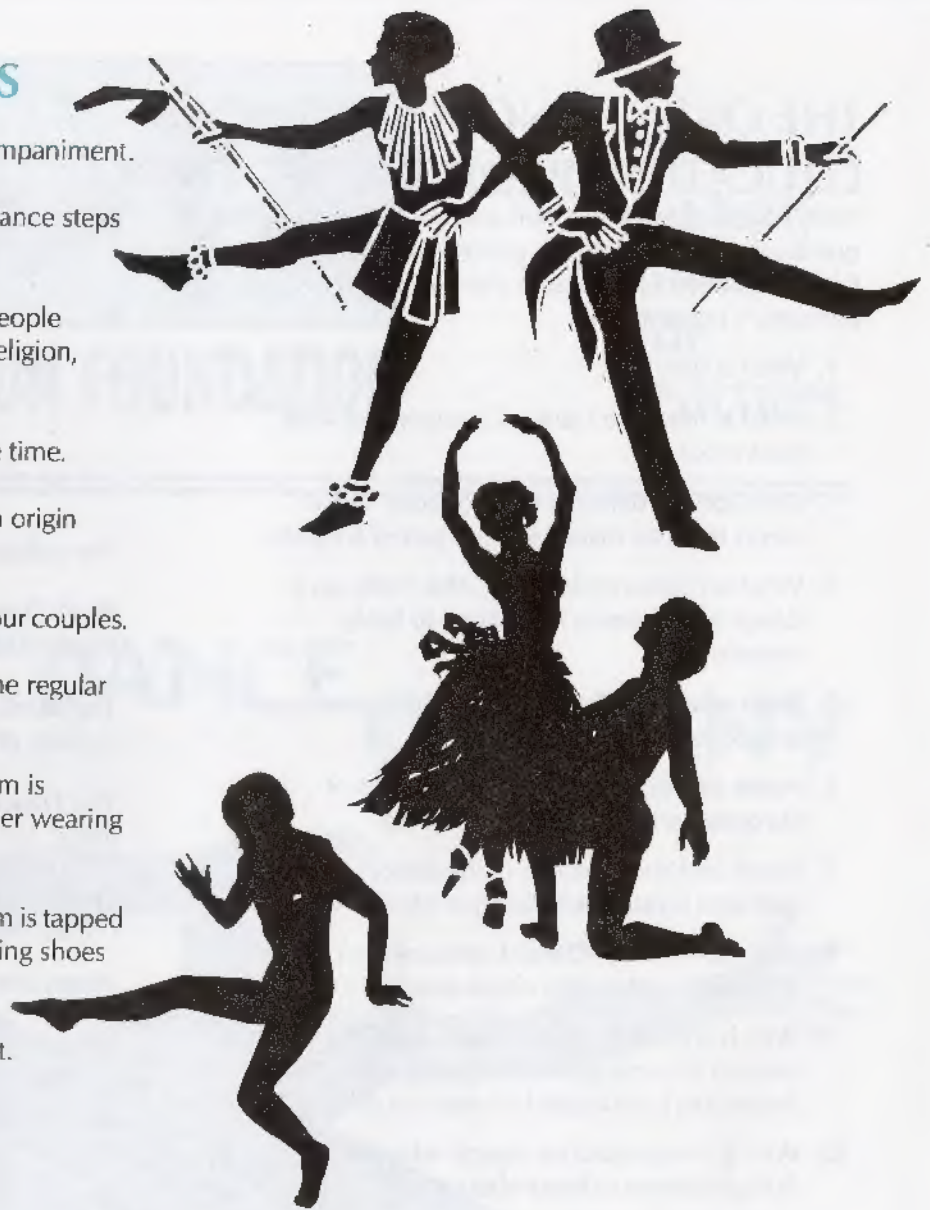
QUADRILLE: A type of square dance for four couples.

RHYTHM: Movement characterized by the regular recurrence of beat.

SOFT SHOE: A dance in which the rhythm is tapped out with the toe or heel by a dancer wearing soft-soled shoes, without taps.

TAP DANCE: A dance in which the rhythm is tapped out with the toe or heel by a dancer wearing shoes with special hard soles or with taps.

TEMPO: The rate of speed of a movement.



FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Have your students make up a group story about a happy or sad event. Then, drawing on elements of the dances they saw performed, have them create their own dance that will tell the story. Based on your students' interests and abilities, assign them (in pairs or small groups) appropriate roles (i.e. as choreographers, music arrangers, costume designers and performers).
2. Make available to your students multiple copies of images or photographs of professional American dancers of various racial and ethnic backgrounds who perform(ed) dances your students saw or those which are very similar. Then have each student create an "American Dance" collage with these materials.
3. Have each student do research on an American dancer and his or her dance style and prepare an oral report for an upcoming session. Possible subjects are:

Alvin Ailey

Fred Astaire

Jacques d'Amboise

Martha Graham

Arthur Mitchell

Jerome Robbins

Paul Taylor

Twyla Tharp

Katherine Dunham

Gregory Hines

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

Earl "Snakehips" Tucker

THE OKRA DANCE COMPANY EDUCATION PROJECT POST TEST

Have your students write their answers to the following questions at the completion of the Okra Dance Company Education Project to measure their knowledge of the company's presentation.

1. What is dance?
2. What is the Okra Dance Company and what does it do?
3. Describe the different types of body movements that can make up all or part of a dance.
4. What are some of the things that make up a dance performance in addition to body movements?
5. From what periods of time did the dances you saw performed come from?
6. Name and describe two of the dances of European origin you saw performed.
7. Name and describe two of the dances you saw that were created by Africans or African Americans.
8. How has the Okra Dance Company performance affected your thoughts about dancing in general?
9. Why is it important for people of African descent to know about the contribution African Americans have made to American dance?
10. Why is it important for people who are not of African descent to know about these contributions?



The following books may be helpful resources:

Black Dance, From 1619 to Today by Lynne Fauley Emery (Dance Horizons Books, 1989)

The Black Tradition in American Dance by Richard A. Long (Rizzoli, 1989)

The Dance Encyclopedia edited by Anatole Chujoy and P. W. Manchester (Simon & Schuster, 1967)

World History of the Dance by Curt Sachs, (W. W. Norton & Co., 1963)

Your students may enjoy the following books:

Afro-Bets® First Book About Africa by Veronica Freeman, illustrated by George Ford (Just Us Books, 1989)

Dance on the Dusty Earth by Christine Price (Scribner, 1979)

I Can Dance by Brian Bullard and David Charlsen (Putnam, 1979)

Sometimes I Dance Mountains by Byrd Baylor (Scribner, 1973)

The World of Dance by Melvin Berger (S. G. Phillips, 1978)

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The Carter G. Woodson Foundation is a multi-disciplinary arts institution that organizes and produces the OnStage In New Jersey Performance Series, Black Culture On Tour In America, and the Artists-In-The-Schools Program.

The mission of the Woodson Foundation is to research, preserve, perpetuate and celebrate the creative expressions, the cultural heritage, and the historic achievements of African Americans through performances, exhibits and educational activities.